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The Reality of Being a Magical Girl:
Madoka Magica's Empowerment through Subversion

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of the requirements for the degree

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Abstract

Magical girl anime—shows like *Cardcaptor Sakura* and *Sailor Moon*—provide viewers with powerful female role models, but their main purpose is to entertain young girls by using tropes such as small animal familiars, teamwork, love, and justice. In 2011, a series called *Madoka Magica* premiered, revealing that underneath the bright colors and cute outfits are girls who struggle. This paper aims to show how *Madoka Magica* empowers viewers and provides them with value beyond entertainment through the way it calls attention to the unrealistic outer image of magical girl shows and exposes the emotional reality of girls who identify as heroes. By showing heroes that are just as real as any other girl despite their fictional nature, *Madoka Magica* lets viewers see that magic does not make one invincible and that experiencing things like loneliness, depression, and death are just a part of growing up—magic or no magic.

Fantasy is usually a term that either refers to a genre of literature that includes elements like magic and mythical creatures or mental actions like daydreaming. For this, it is often criticized as being childish, unrealistic, and escapist. But this view of fantasy does not allow us to see how it works as a medium in potentially positive ways. If we understand fantasy as more of a medium that includes impossible, fantastical elements in different worlds that are reconstructions of the real world, then we can establish a more concrete view of how fantasy functions in a meaningful way. For example, fantasy, in its creation of different worlds, helps people reimagine the way they see themselves and the world. Fantasy, for the purposes of this paper, will refer to the term as a medium for understanding our world; tools of fantasy can include any media such as novels and video games, but this paper will focus on animation as a tool of this medium to help viewers gain new insights.

Anime, a Japanese style of animation, also receives its fair share of criticism for being childish and unrealistic—mainly from people who see it synonymous with “entertainment that is designed for mass appeal and minimal thinking . . . Such entertainment is not ‘high’ or even ‘good’ art, or so the thinking goes; it’s this kind of material that we engage with when we simply want to shut down our thinking centers.”¹ But anime is like fantasy in its ability to offer new perceptions about the world despite its unrealistic outer image. As opposed to the expectation that cartoons are exaggerated and unrealistic, anime tends to mix unrealistic, stylized characters and realistically drawn backgrounds and objects, allowing it to create a believable world. Within these constructed worlds, anime can go beyond being entertainment as a visual language that communicates meaning about people and the world—how we live, what is going on in society, etc. However, that does not mean that there are not shows within anime that are aimed at

¹ Versaci, *Comics as Literature*, 2–3.

children and whose purpose is to entertain. Magical girl anime, as its name implies, involves young girls who fight villains using magical powers while wearing elaborate outfits. Aside from this magical element to the shows, the girls live ordinary lives and try to keep their identities secret like American superheroes. These shows, as they are usually marketed toward young girls (10–14 years old), try to empower their viewers by providing strong female role models. But aside from seeing girls as the heroes, the shows' main purpose is to entertain, focusing on themes like love and justice and straying away from things like death and emotional trauma. While many magical girl shows fall sort of rising above this superficiality, *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*, or *Madoka Magica* for short, empowers viewers by breaking down the constructs of the magical girl genre such as the inevitable fate of magical girls becoming the same witches that they fight in the beginning.

Instead of trying to empower young girls by providing strong female heroes as role models, *Madoka Magica* makes its viewers aware of the fictional aspect the show's reality and reveals magical girls with real emotions and a more meaningful message. Through visual reminders that the show does not take place in reality, as well as references to *Faust* and anime and a de-humanization of the characters, *Madoka Magica* distances viewers before reaching out to them through the relatable troubles the characters experience. While a typical magical girl show might involve the viewer simply watching and getting entertained, *Madoka Magica* reveals that underneath the cute appearance are girls who struggle, demonstrating that though the world is sometimes filled with things like depression and death, we can still find hope. Thus, the aim of this paper will be to show how *Madoka Magica* provides viewers with magical girls who are not heroes to fantasize as but real people viewers relate to, allowing them to reflect and find strength in their own lives.

Describing Fantasy and Anime

As far as defining fantasy as a medium, scholars—from the research that I have gathered²—acknowledge that it refers to works with impossible elements and/or secondary worlds; I would add that it is a medium that reconstructs elements of reality and therefore does not create completely separate worlds. Rosemary Jackson supports this addition in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*: “Fantasy is not to do with inventing another non-human world: it is not transcendental. It has to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and *apparently* ‘new’, absolutely ‘other’ and ‘different.’”³ Gary Wolfe also supports this claim, adding an affective element to this representation of reality in that fantasy “‘attempts to disrupt the physical world in order to bring change to the heart and mind.’”⁴ Fantasy brings about these changes by imbuing the characters and setting with emotional significance and entwining this with elements of the “impossible,” making “the works themselves concern things that could not be more real.”⁵ Wolfe clarifies “impossible” by referring to the fact that our reality is socially constructed, meaning “the irreality of fantasy must gain some of its power from socially determined notions of what is

² Though not all the scholars draw the same conclusion, they all acknowledge and represent Tolkien’s definition of fantasy that includes secondary worlds in their argument. These works that have helped me in defining fantasy is Andrew Rayment’s *Fantasy, Politics, Postmodernity: Pratchett, Pullman, Miéville and Stories of the Eye*, Dierde Baker’s “Fantasy” in *Keywords for Children’s Literature*, and Gary Wolfe’s *Evaporating Genres*.

³ Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, 8, emphasis in original.

⁴ Wolfe, *Evaporating Genres*, 68–69.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

possible and impossible.”⁶ Thus, readers perceive fantasy based on their constructed views of what is impossible or something that does not currently exist in their world.

But, as Wolfe hints at, fantasy goes deeper than simply containing these elements; going back to the origin of the word “in the Greek word *fantasia*, literally ‘a making visible,’ ‘to make visible,’ or ‘to show,’”⁷ fantasy is a medium with the ability to “challenge its readers to see.”⁸ Rayment adds, fantasy works to “displace elements of the ‘real’ world of our everyday social ‘reality’ . . . and then throw it back at us as a ‘real being,’ a Fantasy reality that is more reality than ‘reality’ itself.”⁹ Fantasy is a medium that functions much like general fiction, but it takes the real world and reinterprets it in new ways with impossible elements as perceived by the reader that allow him or her to gain a new view of the world. Just as we can open our minds to new possibilities through fantasy, anime visually expresses new worlds and ways to imagine our world. What this means is that despite sometimes seeming like a medium that is only meant for entertainment or minimal thinking, anime visually creates worlds that function as safe, imaginative spaces for viewers to explore different possibilities in their minds. This could be as simple as seeing characters arguing and resolving a conflict, which might spark a viewer to imagine a different way to approach a conflict in his or her own life. The shows present viewers with meaningful content in the actions and emotions of the characters that—especially when viewers are personally connected to a show and its characters—can help them reimagine similar scenarios and relationships in their own lives to come up with new perspectives.

⁶ Ibid., 73.

⁷ Baker, “Fantasy,” in *Keywords for Children’s Literature*, 79, emphasis in original.

⁸ Rayment, *Fantasy, Politics, Postmodernity*, 18.

⁹ Ibid., 21.

Despite anime's hyper-cartoony art style, it is able to expand people's views and create meaningful a connection to the story and characters by balancing unreal and real elements to create believable worlds. In the first place, the characters can still be accepted as representations of people, since the "'Anime look,' which is immediately recognizable as unreal, with strange hair and large eyes" still possesses characteristics that are recognizable as human.¹⁰ Anime scholars, such as Otsuka Eiji,¹¹ write that anime achieves a realistic representation of the real world through detailed objects and settings that balance out the otherwise unreal look of anime; for example, what Eiji calls scientific realism, which tries to create "a sense of visual resemblance to real-world objects, or their photographic representations."¹² The use of detailed objects and backgrounds sets up a believable world despite the characters that seem placed somewhere outside of reality, allowing a sense that the characters are real people who exist in this world. This mixture of unreal and realistic elements distances the viewer from seeing anime as real yet encourages a suspension of disbelief in order to engage with the characters and storyline.

As a tool for fantasy, anime rises above entertainment value by expressing deep, emotional stories through visual language. In fact, when we just consider anime for its medium, "Animation is a visual language and an act of communication . . . To animate is essentially to communicate to tell a story for oneself or others or for both via a chain of manipulated and

¹⁰ Suan, *The Anime Paradox*, 202.

¹¹ Eiji not only writes analytically on the subject of manga and anime but is also an author of several manga series such as *Tajū-Jinkaku Tantei Saiko* or *Multiple Personality Detective Psycho*.

¹² Steinberg, "Realism in the Animation Media," 292.

designed images.”¹³ Therefore, viewing anime as a visual form of expression, it has the ability “to express a deeper understanding of the ‘real world’ we all live in. . . . [anime] make[s] an effort to explore how fragile the world and its reality is, simultaneously reminding us that what we are viewing is ultimately unreal, despite how detailed the fantasy may be.”¹⁴ In addition to realistic backgrounds and objects, something else that gives a sense of reality to anime is its emotional content. The way the audience connects with anime emotionally gives it life and a greater significance. As Suan writes, “despite the carefully constructed unreality there is a very potent element of (human) joy and suffering that is evident in all the art forms. The inner ‘reality’ grounds the works to the human world.”¹⁵ This is where the audience goes “behind the illusion of the mask and the celluloid film, to realize its fantasy and see past it to the depth of the emotional realm beyond. When the circumstances are unreal, all that is left recognizably real is the emotion.”¹⁶ Anime provides reality through its emotional content such as the emotions of characters, something viewers can connect to, especially younger viewers still learning about themselves. *Madoka Magica* realizes anime’s potential to bring meaning by breaking conventions of the magical girl genre to make something more than simple entertainment for children.

Before we look at empowerment in *Madoka Magica*, it is helpful to get an idea of how the magical girl genre typically performs. A simple summary of the magical girl genre is that it “depicts young, ordinary female characters caught between the liminality of girlhood (often

¹³ Hu, *Frames of Anime*, 13.

¹⁴ Suan, *The Anime Paradox*, 178.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 213.

placed in the setting of junior high school or *chūnibyō*), who by some twist of fate via some mystical creature are made magical by ‘wishfulfilling fantasies of empowerment.’”¹⁷ Some of the elements characteristic of magical girl anime is its cute and harmless appearance: “stuffed animals, fluffy dresses, and an overall ‘cute’ (*kawaii*) image.”¹⁸ This gives the characters a distinct set of characteristics in their designs that involve bright colors and images. Another aspect of the show’s appearance is when the girl or girls transform in a stylish transformation sequence that gives them new outfits and weapons such as “wands, amulets, or makeup” in order to fight villains. These villains are usually categorized as the opposite of the magical girl’s morals, which involve “ideals of love, friendship, justice, and peace.”¹⁹ These elements do not inherently mean magical girl anime only functions to entertain, but many of the shows in the genre stick to superficial themes. For example, *Cardcaptor Sakura*’s protagonist Sakura fights in low stakes battles—she only needs to capture and reseal creatures that have escaped from “clow cards” by reciting an incantation and moving her magic wand—and attention is drawn toward the new outfits she wears in each fight, as her friend designs the clothes and insists on recording the fights on camera. The series ends not with some final battle that she must overcome but with Sakura finally realizing her feelings for her rival after he confesses to her.

The real issue with magical girl series is not that they focus on lighthearted entertainment for young girls but that before *Madoka Magica*, none fully lived up to their potential to do what “challenges us to see the world differently . . . by using exceptional and unique representational strategies, by subverting commonly held beliefs and assumptions, and by calling attention to

¹⁷ Rachovitsky, “Tracing the Japanese Gothic in *Madoka Magica*,” 99.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

both how texts represent the world and what is at stake in those representations.”²⁰ *Madoka Magica* puts on the mask of the magical girl genre while “transgressing and piercing the façade of order of reason, of normality and certitude, questioning the existence of the empirical world, and suggesting the possibility that what we have been taught to see as real is nothing more than an illusion.”²¹ For instance, the small animal familiar that normally assists the girls—in *Cardcaptor Sakura*, the main character is given advice and cheered on in battle by Cerberus, who looks like a teddy bear with a long tail and wings; in *Sailor Moon*, there are two cats who play the same role—is replaced with an alien creature named Kyubey, whose main purpose is to collect the energy released when the girls inevitably turn into witches once their soul gems become too clouded. We are taught to not trust the same small animal that magical girls would normally accept as guides and friends, which suggests a deeper questioning of the other fantastical elements in magical girl anime that we accept as benign. Even the self-sacrifice that is present in other magical girl anime is taken to a new level by Madoka giving up her entire existence in order to become a god that can erase all witches before they are born.²² Thus, *Madoka Magica* offers a new reality for what it means to become a magical girl—one that might cause viewers to question a fantasy world where everything seems all right, allowing them to gain deeper understandings of the world.

Reminders of Fictionality/Calling out the Unreal

²⁰ Ibid., 7.

²¹ Rachovitsky, “Tracing the Japanese Gothic in *Madoka Magica*,” 98.

²² There is also a particularly dark scene in an alternate timeline where Madoka uses her last grief seed to cleanse Homura’s soul gem instead of her own and then asks Homura to shoot her before she turns into a witch.

One of the ways *Madoka Magica* calls attention to the unreality of its genre and medium is through visual reminders that this show does not take place in reality. Not even a minute into the first episode, the viewer is confronted with a large green exit sign as the main character ascends a staircase, suggesting that what we are about to experience is leaving one area and entering another, i.e., leaving reality and entering a fantasy. This sign is also emphasized at the end of the episode along with Sayaka asking, “I must be dreaming, right?”²³ This indication of leaving reality creates a hyper-awareness that what we are viewing is not real. Another visual sense of danger is in the witch labyrinths the girls must fight in:



From *Madoka Magica* episode 3.²⁴

Not only are the girls unable to leave the labyrinth once they are inside it, but the appearance of the labyrinths contrasts the cute image of the magical girl genre with images that are unsettling and nightmarish. The show also uses a different style of animation for the witches and labyrinths that sets it apart from the rest of their “reality” and communicates a sense of danger that comes with becoming a magical girl and fighting witches. These visual elements remind viewers that

²³ Shinbo and Urobuchi, *Madoka Magica*, ep. 1 (20:43), 2011.

²⁴ Shinbo and Urobuchi, *Madoka Magica*, produced by Shaft, ep. 3, 2011.

what they are watching takes place in a dangerous reality separate from what one would expect from other magical girl anime that take place in representations of real world locations like Tokyo.

Other elements that remind viewers of the fictional aspect of the show are the frequent references to *Faust*. In fact, the basic premise of the show involves the girls making a Faustian deal with Kyubey to become magical girls. In the very start of the first episode, curtains lift like a show is about to begin and lines from *Faust* appear in runes. Combined with mentions of dreaming and the exit signs that signal leaving reality, this visual aspect of the show sets it up like a performance—something an audience accepts as real even though they know it is just actors playing parts and the world is fictional. Other references to *Faust* include direct verses written on the walls leading to witch labyrinths and pages from the play in Homura's apartment. The strongest connection to *Faust* is the most powerful witch the girls face: Walpurgisnacht—a reference to the event toward the end of the first part of the play. When she appears on screen, she is preceded by a number countdown as if the show is about to begin, and she is laughing maniacally throughout the fight. It gives the final fight the same performative aspect in the first episode, highlighting the show's fictive nature through these book ends and the feeling that it is like a play. The show thus works toward creating the ultimate reminder that this is a work of fiction or something not entirely real.

Another way the show pulls the veil on its reality, so to speak, is by being referencing anime, its own mode of production. In the first episode, Sayaka tells Madoka “You’re acting like an anime character” when Madoka says that she met Homura in a dream.²⁵ Sayaka references the unreal aspect of having dreamt about someone Madoka never met before as well as the medium

²⁵ Ibid., ep. 1 (15:30).

that they are a part of that allows these unreal elements to exist. Toward the end of the first episode Sayaka is still in disbelief as they meet Kyubey and run into a witch's labyrinth; she wonders if Kyubey is a stuffed animal or really alive because of its unusual appearance. This scene's dialogue acknowledges the common trope of small animal characters in magical girl anime and the unreal aspect of their existence. The show really demonstrates a self-awareness, though, in the final episode. After Madoka has ascended to a god-like state, she ceases to exist and everyone forgets who she was, even her family. When Homura mentions Madoka's name in front of Madoka's mom, she remarks if it is the name of some anime character. This refers to the fact that Madoka is, in fact, an anime character, who has now been broken down into a concept—she becomes the “law of cycles” that prevents witches from being born by destroying magical girls' soul gems before they transform into witches anywhere and at all times—meaning she does and does not exist. These references show the characters expressing their own awareness as characters playing roles in this fictional world, though to them they believe they are existing in reality. The references also serve to remind the viewer that the show is just that, distancing the viewer while eventually pulling them in emotionally.

Distancing the Viewer through De-humanization

Aside from these reminders of fictionality, *Madoka Magica* further distances the viewer through de-humanizing elements like the revelation that Kyubey is an alien creature called an “Incubator.”²⁶ At first it appears helpful, assisting the girls with information and letting them

²⁶ Some fans have observed that its name could relate to “Kyuubi,” referring to the nine-tailed fox in Japanese mythology known for tricking people. This would support the duplicitous nature of Kyubey, though its name might also refer to the part of the word “incubator” when it is pronounced in Japanese.

communicate telepathically, but even though it is obligated to get consent before making contracts, it does not tell the girls the true nature of the soul gems they use to fight. In episode six, they discover that their soul gems are actually their souls ripped from their bodies and that if the gem is thrown away or destroyed then they die. When they react with sorrow and anger, it replies, “You humans always react the same way. Whenever I try to tell you simple facts, you inevitably have this same reaction.”²⁷ When confronted further by Sayaka about tricking them, Kyubey responds that it wanted them to be magical girls but just did not explain what form they would take.²⁸ It takes a logical you-didn’t-ask approach to accusations of deception, which makes it seem more cruel but also more alien than human. This is especially apparent in the episode where it explains its job as an Incubator and the history of magical girls to Madoka, telling her that emotion is a disease on their planet and comparing magical girls to cattle. In the end, Kyubey’s cute form cannot hide the fact that it is something separate from humans—not magical, but alien. Kyubey’s true nature pulls away more of the cute and magical veneer of the magical girl genre and turns it into something sinister.

Though the girls embody many tropes of the magical girl genre, in *Madoka Magica* the form magical girls take makes them seem inhuman like Kyubey—less like girls fighting evil and more like creatures made to fight witches. After Sayaka becomes a magical girl, Madoka asks Homura to help her, but she gives the ominous reply: “Just as the dead don’t return to life, consider her fate sealed. . . . Once you’ve become a magical girl, you have no hope for salvation.”²⁹ It does not become clear until later when the nature of soul gems is revealed what

²⁷ Shinbo and Urobuchi, *Madoka Magica*, ep. 6 (21:56–20:00), 2011.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, ep. 7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, ep. 5 (13:13, 13:21).

Homura means by this. The revelation even leads Sayaka to think of herself as “a walking, talking corpse, pretending it’s still alive.”³⁰ She does not confess her feelings to the boy she likes because she sees herself as inhuman, asking how he could hold someone with a body like hers. But even more troubling than the nature of soul gems is the fact that the witches they have been fighting turn out to be magical girls whose soul gems have become too clouded. Homura then reveals, “That is the inescapable fate of all who become magical girls.”³¹ Madoka is upset at her emotionless response, but Homura calmly replies that she no longer considers herself human either. Magical girls are transformed into witches—something monstrous and inhuman, as shown by their appearance:



Sayaka’s witch form Oktavia (left) from episode 9 and Getrud (right) from episode 2.³²

This confronts viewers with a reality that magic comes with a cost, which in this case seems to be humanity, pushing viewers away from an idealized view of magical girls and magic.

³⁰ Ibid., ep. 8 (4:20).

³¹ Ibid., ep. 9 (4:37).

³² Shinbo and Urobuchi, *Madoka Magica*, produced by Shaft, ep. 2 and 9, 2011.

Madoka Magica de-humanizes magical girls further by taking the objectification normally seen in magical girl shows' focus on the appearance of the characters and turning its characters into literal tools or objects used for the Incubators' purpose. When Kyubey describes the soul gem as a necessity for fighting without damaging their physical bodies, it also suggests that Sayaka can completely detach her mind and body to not feel pain in battle.³³ Her body will then just become a tool to fight witches without any concern for how she feels, which she actually does, exclaiming, "If I just detach myself . . . I really don't feel any pain!"³⁴ Sayaka comes to feel that her only use is in fighting witches, defining her existence as a tool to fight rather than as a human. This is actually pertinent to an issue with other magical girl anime, as "female bodies are fragmented by the use of camera movements such as point-of-view shots from a predominantly male viewpoint and close-ups of female body parts"³⁵ during the transformation sequences when the girls don their outfits. The outfits themselves can also be revealing, adding to the criticism that anime tends to show young girls as sexual objects.³⁶ Objectification of girls in the magical girl genre relates to Sayaka's feelings as a tool for fighting and shows how *Madoka Magica*—while participating in the transformation sequence trope—comments on this issue by physically turning the girls into objects that produce destruction and energy. The fun and fantastical transformation that magical girls usually undergo is replaced with a process that makes them into something inhuman and tool-like, but unlike being tools for our

³³ Ibid., ep. 7.

³⁴ Ibid., (22:22–22:28).

³⁵ Shimada, "Representations of Girls," 31.

³⁶ Shimada notes, "Many feminist critics agree that young heroines in anime tend to be hyper-sexualised"

entertainment and comfort, this becomes a way to break down the idolized view of magical girls into something more like real girls.

Real Girls Who Struggle

We already know that these shows are not real, but the reminders of the fictive and unreal nature of the show subverts our expectations for what the “reality” of a magical girl show should be. It is normally a world that viewers can accept as real enough that they can take comfort in it and possibly imagine themselves in it, such as the worlds in *Carcaptor Sakura* or *Sailor Moon*, which outside of the battles follow the girls’ lives at school and home, where they might be hanging out with friends or going shopping. But *Madoka Magica* distances viewers who expect this sort of show, taking off the guise of a typical magical girl show and revealing something more than simply a believable, fictional world: real girls. Viewers normally watch a magical girl show to feel happy and entertained—they might even feel empowered by seeing girls as the heroes³⁷—but *Madoka Magica*, after pushing viewers away, reaches out to what a viewer’s reality might actually be like. Instead of pretending that things are all right, we see depression, isolation, and selfishness. Viewers get a chance to feel empowered not through “girl power”—just the simple appearance of girls in the hero’s role—but a sense that reality is filled with awful things like death and depression, but this is normal and they can continue to hope despite these things.

³⁷ Shimada’s research looks at three different age groups of women who watched magical girl anime growing up, noting that for some of the groups, “the women took pleasure in having a secret identity through the performance of fantasised magical transformations, expressing the ‘self’ as different from others” (19).

One of the reminders of reality is dialogue that presents what may be more of a realistic picture of being a magical girl. When Mami is telling Madoka and Sayaka about witches, she says, “Actually, they’re very dangerous.”³⁸ Usually magical girl anime makes the fights seem like fun, almost like a dance or performance, and the heroine and/or her team appear to be invincible. Mami also delivers a caution about becoming a magical girl as the girls contemplate their decision: “Remember that that wish lies side-by-side with death.”³⁹ Even though Kyubey seems desperate to get the girls to make a wish to create a contract and become magical girls, Mami takes on a nurturing role in teaching them what it is like to be a magical girl. She reveals that her wish was to live after being in a car accident, not leaving her much of a choice, so she wants to give the girls that opportunity. She warns them again, “It’s not a magic show. Don’t forget what we’re doing here is very dangerous.”⁴⁰ This relates to fighting witches, but Mami breaks down the glamour even more when she confesses to Madoka, “Even when I’m scared, or hurting, there’s no one I can talk to. All I can do is cry on my own. It isn’t a good thing to be a magical girl.”⁴¹ Mami, who represents the typical magical girl heroine, actually says that it is not good to be a magical girl; accompanied by her other warnings, this speaks to viewers about whether it is a good thing to imagine themselves as magical girls—especially because they are not always the invincible heroes—rather than finding strength in themselves.

One of the strongest reminders that magical girls live in a reality similar to ours is when Mami fails to heed her own warnings and dies, showing viewers that magical girls can die too.

³⁸ Ibid., ep. 2 (6:18).

³⁹ Ibid., (6:40).

⁴⁰ Ibid., ep. 3 (3:30).

⁴¹ Ibid., (16:30).

Many people mark this as the turning point in the series, since no one expects one of the main characters to die, especially one who represents so strongly the ideal magical girl. This is also shocking because most magical girl anime does not even mention the word “death” when it comes to battles. In general the sight is shocking for viewers to see; however, this is where anime is able to work well to show the reality of death: “Because the form of Anime is animated, it allows for a number of topics to be taken up that would otherwise be too grueling or fantastic to be seen in a live action rendition.”⁴² The unreality of the show’s illustrations helps the death seem less gruesome and allows the viewer to take away what the scene might try to tell us. At the moment of Mami’s death, Homura saves Madoka and Sayaka and tells them, “Burn this sight into your minds. This is what it means to be a magical girl.”⁴³ She emphasizes that her death was the definitive proof of a magical girl’s reality and the best warning against making a contract. Sayaka comments on what it is like to not realize death is a part of reality when she says, “Maybe we’re just blissfully ignorant fools.”⁴⁴ Despite the unreal existence of magic, it cannot make one invincible and get rid of the reality of death.

Madoka Magica also adds a touch of reality in the emotional complexity of its heroines, introducing real emotions like selfishness. Hu writes that anime has the potential to be emotionally complex because “values like righteousness and justice and an ultimate moral black-and-white solution are not overly emphasized in manga and anime; they hence widen the ‘depth and humanity’ and the ‘diverse,’ ‘realistic’ image of what a hero truly is.”⁴⁵ In the first place, in

⁴² Suan, *The Anime Paradox*, 193.

⁴³ Shinbo and Urobuchi, *Madoka Magica*, ep. 3 (21:50), 2011.

⁴⁴ Ibid., ep. 2 (12:10).

⁴⁵ Hu, *Frames of Anime*, 13.

most magical girl anime “female solidarity is represented as a source of power”⁴⁶—the girls often fighting in teams and banding together when an enemy is too tough. However, though Mami, Sayaka, and Madoka go together to fight witches, Mami is the only one fighting. It is more typical for magical girls in *Madoka Magica* to fight alone because they require grief seeds that witches drop to clean their soul gems; they are naturally encouraged to compete for territory and the chance to fight witches. Though typical magical girl battles are never a matter of life and death, after Sayaka’s battle with a rival magical girl over Mami’s territory, she reveals to Madoka they were not just fighting but were taking part in a battle with the intent to kill. The sense that teamwork and friendship can solve everything is replaced by a system of magical girls who only work for themselves, introducing selfishness to the characteristics of these girls who still technically save people. Just like normal girls, they have their own wants and desires in addition to their individual ideas of justice. This adds a realistic quality to these magical girls, making them people viewers might be able to see themselves as and thus encouraging a self-reflection that can lead to more strength than simply fantasizing as the hero, which carries implications for being invincible and upholding a certain moral standard.

The show further complicates the image of these heroines by showing the harm of isolation and the loneliness and depression that can result from being a magical girl. We see a magical girl’s isolation early on when Mami tells Madoka that there is no one she can talk to and all she can do is cry on her own. Being a magical girl is a limiting experience that no one else in this fictive world can relate to and fighting witches is a solitary act due to the competition for grief seeds. After Mami dies, Sayaka vows to protect everyone from witches in Mami’s honor,

⁴⁶ Shimada, “Representations of Girls,” 18.

but she confesses, “Even though I’m a magical girl. I get so scared when I’m alone.”⁴⁷ Madoka goes with Sayaka, but Sayaka must fight alone in the end. She stubbornly pushes away the help of Kyoko and Homura and chooses to detach herself from her body so she can become stronger and not feel pain. Madoka realizes that something is wrong and tells Sayaka, “Just because you don’t feel it, it doesn’t mean it’s okay to get hurt.”⁴⁸ As Sayaka enters into a depressed state, isolated and detached from the world as well as her friends, she gets closer and closer to becoming a witch. Her mental state reflects the harm and burden magical girls face in their lives as tools to fight witches. Even with friends or other magical girls, there is no love and support that can cure the depression brought on by her isolated state. This is a part of the emotional reality of the show that viewers can connect to and reflect on. As we see these characters as real girls experiencing emotions like us, “we produce the emotion for them and/or make the unreal feel real” through our own connection to the characters.⁴⁹ We once again see that these heroes are not limitlessly strong due to magic and still have the ability to break down emotionally, and there is something empowering about identifying with heroes who face suffering, because it makes it seem okay to face the same troubles and not be invulnerable.

Sayaka’s feelings of isolation take an even darker turn when she turns into a witch; her transformation is like a suicide that results from her depression, as the person she once was is destroyed. Sayaka starts as someone who believes in the power of magical girls to protect those she loves, declaring “Miracles . . . and magic . . . are real!”⁵⁰ But as she continues to fight alone,

⁴⁷ Ibid., ep. 5 (15:22).

⁴⁸ Ibid., ep. 8 (3:38).

⁴⁹ Suan, *The Anime Paradox*, 197.

⁵⁰ Shinbo and Urobuchi, *Madoka Magica*, ep. 4 (15:11), 2011.

she begins to realize that she might not be strong enough and being a magical girl is a thankless job. As she is burdened more, she begins to resent the world and the ones she has saved, putting her in conflict with her sense of justice and causing her to feel guilty. The turning point, however, is when she hears two men in a train talking about using women for money. Her romantic illusion of a world filled with love and justice is taken away, and her identity as a magical girl is challenged. Up until that point, Sayaka had redefined herself as a magical girl—an ally of justice who fights witches—but she is confronted with a world that is not better just for having magic in it: “Is this world even worth protecting? What have I been fighting for all this time?”⁵¹ Sayaka starts with an ideal of justice similar to a viewer believing in the power of magical girls to rid the world of evil. Her disillusionment, depression, and breakdown can be felt by viewers through their connection to her: “We project the emotions onto these celluloid beings. It is a very personal experience . . . It is our feelings that are placed onto theirs and so we find ourselves in their world looking at ourselves.”⁵² Even if someone does not identify with Sayaka, it is hard not to feel the impact of what might be called her suicide, as her self-destructive stubbornness leads to her turning into a witch—a process that destroys her soul, and thus, her “self.” We see the true harm of the isolated experience of being a magical girl as well as a hero who struggles with something very real, again letting viewers feel empowered to see even a fictional character who faces the problems of reality.

Conclusion

⁵¹ Ibid., ep. 8 (15:00–15:02).

⁵² Suan, *The Anime Paradox*, 226.

Magical girl anime is a genre of anime that may seem even more unrealistic than other genres of anime because it contains elements like magical powers and talking animal sidekicks, but it has potential to create meaningful stories and combat the criticism that anime is just another form of entertainment that requires minimal thinking. However, it is a genre that is typically marketed toward children, so it generally aims to simply entertain and possibly empower viewers through the appearance of female heroines. The shows may make viewers feel powerful, but it still does not leave them where they can feel power in themselves, where it is okay to have weakness and at times feel the burden of their emotions. *Madoka Magica* still fits many of the tropes of magical girl anime but works to strip away the cute, fictional veneer and leave us with more meaningful content. While it may seem that the show is dark simply to go against what is expected of magical girl anime, *Madoka Magica* works at constructing a message to viewers who believe in magical girls: it is okay to believe in magical girls, as long as we remember that they are not real. Even if magic does not make us invincible, it can at least provide comfort for a while, and “there are awful . . . sad things in this world, but there are lots . . . of things . . . worth protecting too.”⁵³

⁵³ Ibid., ep. 10 (17:14–17:21).

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